
THAI-YUNNAN PROJECT BULLETIN

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Welcome to the Thai-Yunnan Project Bulletin

This is the first issue of the Thai-Yunnan Project Bulletin, which now succeeds the Thai-Yunnan Project Newsletter which the late Gehan Wijeyewardene edited for many years (see Obituary, page 3). The Bulletin is an online journal only, and will not be distributed by mail, but you are welcome to print out and distribute copies. Back issues of the old Thai-Yunnan Project Newsletter are available online at:

<http://rspas.anu.edu.au/anthropology/thai-yunnan.html>

We plan to have three issues of the Bulletin per year, carrying some short leading articles as well as news of current and forthcoming publications, research, and meetings both at The Australian National University and elsewhere. Contributions, comments, letters and feedback in general are welcome and eagerly invited (details on page 5), and may also be made through the Thai-Yunnan Research Forum, a recently established electronic network. For information on how to subscribe to the Forum see page 4. NT & AW❖

Monumental Pride: Sino-Vietnamese Cross-border Commemorations of Nùng Trí Cao

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Nowhere else is the 11th-century rebel Nùng Trí Cao (Nong Zhigao 儂智高) (1025? -1055?) more revered than in his own home region within Tai-speaking communities along the modern border between China's Guangxi Autonomous Region and Viet Nam's Cao Bằng Province. The present source of regional pride in Trí Cao may be found in tales of his three ambitious but unsuccessful attempts to establish a Sino-Vietnamese frontier kingdom in 1042, 1048 and 1052. Throughout the imperial period, both Chinese and Vietnamese court historians labeled Nùng Trí Cao a troublemaker. His public image was not rehabilitated until Marxist regimes took power in these countries. Nùng Trí Cao is now remembered officially on both sides of the border as a "hero of the people", although the identity of "the people" remains unclear.

However, public sites for the veneration of this local hero are not evenly distributed across the border. While few such sites are now located in southern China, northern Viet Nam supports numerous locations to celebrate the deeds of Nùng Trí Cao, his father Nùng Tôn Phúc 儂存福 and his mother A Nùng. In Cao Bằng province annual festivals have long been observed to honor these figures. Five temples dedicated to the worship of Nùng Trí Cao stayed active well into the twentieth century, and two of these temples survived French colonial administration, guerrilla warfare and police action to remain in use even today. These extant temples include the Kỳ Sâm Temple on the outskirts of the city of Cao Bằng and a temple in Quàng Nguyễn commune, long considered the home region of Nùng Trí Cao. Moreover, a temple located in Ha Quàng County's Sóc Hà commune remained active until its destruction during the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese border conflict. The Nã Lu Temple on the banks of the Bắng River several kilometers upstream from Cao Bằng was reportedly erected on the site of Nùng Tôn

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Phúc's former citadel. A small makeshift temple dedicated to A Nùng still stands in the western Cao Bãng suburbs.

The modern-day veneration of Nùng Trí Cao and his parents in Cao Bãng province is closely tied to the shared regional identity of people from this region. Trí Cao remains a hero and a "man of prowess," and worship includes practices that highlight the particular strengths of Trí Cao, including his willingness to face up to the aggression of both Song and Đại Việt authorities and his ambition to unify and heighten the status of his region's people. From the historical record, one can also see that, by the late 19th century, annual festivals devoted to the spirit of Nùng Trí Cao were regionally important. It is equally apparent that the appeal of these Vietnamese festivals extended beyond clan or ethnic affiliations to the general populace that has often included communities on both sides of the modern political border.

In stark contrast to the wealth of evidence for worship activity in northern Viet Nam, there is little confirmation in the Chinese historical record of the existence of temple sites dedicated to Trí Cao in China. In fact, most relevant Chinese sources only describe stelae and temples that honor the names of the Song generals who crushed Trí Cao's bid for independence. Only in the last few years has the issue of a public memorial to Nùng Trí Cao in China been addressed. On January 8th, 1997 a local group of Trí Cao's descendants and their supporters from the Guangxi township of Jingxi 靖西 and the tiny village of Xia Lei 下雷 took the initiative to revive interest in this rebel's life and deeds. The vice-director of the Center for Zhuang Studies in Nanning, Pan Qixu 潘其旭, had earlier been invited to Xia Lei to authenticate the discovery of the cave believed to be Nùng Trí Cao's dwelling and storehouse at the time he founded his first kingdom. A modern stele was then erected on this site. A large group of provincial officials and leading academics from Guangxi reportedly attended the commemoration ceremony.

This ceremony did generate some controversy. Funds for this stele had to be raised privately. Organizers of this event later told me that high-level political figures have avoided involvement in the project, voicing concerns over its "separatist" implications. Nevertheless, the goal of bringing Nùng Trí Cao back into the public eye was largely successful, as the long list of small donors to the stele installation suggested. A glance at the large donors list, however, reveals that 32 out of the 34 persons included had the surname Nong. This fact suggests that although distant Han officials

fear that the memorial could be used to fan regional "Pan-Tai" sentiments, older clan associations may shape local identification with this site.

Local disputes aside, this recent Guangxi memorial and the continuing regional popularity of the temples in Viet Nam are signs that the region has recovered from the "dark days" of the 1980's when the Sino-Vietnamese border remained tense and frosty diplomatic relations curbed official cross-border activities. Communities that honor Trí Cao still span a region that contains many historical sites of bloody confrontation between Chinese and Vietnamese armies. However, these communities share a common thread of identity, preserved in part by a devotion to the figure of Nùng Trí Cao. Their reverence for this 11th-century rebel leader is a sentiment that transcends modern political demarcation.❖

UPCOMING EVENTS

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON THAI STUDIES

NAKHON PATHOM

JANUARY 2001

[HTTP://WWW.RU.AC.TH/THAISTUDIES8TH/](http://www.ru.ac.th/thaistudies8th/)

To be held in Thailand at Nakhon Phanom on 9-12 January 2002, hosted by Ramkhamhaeng University and Rajabhat Institute Nakhon Phanom. Preliminary abstracts due 31 July 2001.

THIRD CONFERENCE OF THE EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION FOR SOUTH-EAST ASIAN STUDIES (EUROSEAS)

LONDON

SEPTEMBER 6-8 2001

[HTTP://IIAS.LEIDENUNIV.NL/INSTITUTES/KITLV/CONFERENCE.DOC](http://iias.leidenuniv.nl/institutes/kitlv/conference.doc)

The panels are multidisciplinary and cover the entire South-East Asian region. A special 'young scholars panel' will allow novice researchers to present their papers and meet their colleagues.

INTERNATIONAL CONVENTION OF ASIA SCHOLARS

BERLIN

AUGUST 9-12 2001

[HTTP://WWW.FU-BERLIN.DE/ICAS2/](http://www.fu-berlin.de/icas2/)

The conference is aimed at providing a broad and inclusive forum for all scholars working on issues related to Asian studies and seeking a way of establishing or improving their international networks.

Ethnicity and Identity in Lak Chang, Daikong

From the preface prepared by Andrew Walker for the English edition of Lak Chang: A Reconstruction of Tai Identity in Daikong by Dr Yos Santasombat of Chiang Mai University to be issued shortly by Pandanus Press at The Australian National University.

This work, originally published in Thai in 2000, is a significant contribution to the ethnographic record of the Tai peoples and, at the same time, a fascinating insight into the current state of ethnography produced *within* the Thai-Yunnan region. In the preface to the Thai edition of the work, Chatthip Nartsupha suggests that this is the first ethnography of the Tai outside Thailand conducted by a Thai scholar and, as such, the book is an important example of the intersection between "local" and "academic" imaginings in the construction and reconstruction of ethnic identity in the Tai—and Thai—worlds.

Readers who are familiar with Thai or Lao culture will find much that is reassuring in this account of life in Lak Chang. Here, in the borderlands of Yunnan province, are Tai farmers cultivating rice in irrigated paddy fields; exchanging labour for transplanting and harvesting; referring to their fellow villagers as *pi* and *nong*, and unselfconsciously combining "spirit beliefs" with Theravada Buddhism. The local language is intelligible, though with some difficulty, to a Thai speaker. Little wonder that one important aspect of the recent renewal of cross-border linkages in the "Thai-Yunnan region" has been a growing interest—often imbued with nostalgia, a little fantasy and the occasional dash of chauvinism—in the spatial and temporal continuities of Tai-ness (and, for some, Thai-ness). These various attempts "to construct the distant past by studying the geographically distant" respond nicely to a widely felt desire for cultural continuity in a space and time of economic, social and environmental transformation.

Of course, in the village of Lak Chang the Tai world is increasingly embraced by the Han Chinese world. Professor Yos skillfully weaves ethnographic and historical writing to chart the course of Lak Chang's incorporation into the modern Chinese state. His account of the period of agricultural cooperatives and communes provides important insight into the impact on

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Gehan Wijeyewardene

Gehan Wijeyewardene, a long-serving member of the Anthropology Department, died of pneumonia on Friday 25 August 2000. Although his death comes as a sad shock to all those who knew him, we had each said our sadder farewells some years ago, when a series of strokes blunted his sharp mind, destroyed his fine humour, and caused distress to his family.

From Ceylon, where he was born in 1932, Gehan found his way to Cambridge, where he took a PhD based on fieldwork in East Africa. After teaching in Singapore for three years he came to RSPAS in 1964 as a Research Fellow. His diverse research interests over the years included agriculture, kinship, ecology, human ethology, ritual and religious behaviour, Thai history and literature, and the politics of international borders. Among his achievements were a dozen books (monographs, translations, edited collections) and innumerable articles. In 1988 he founded the Thai–Yunnan Newsletter and edited four issues a year until his retirement in 1997. He was an indefatigable convenor of conferences, local, national and international, and he founded the Australia-Burma Society, of which he was the first president.

Gehan will long be remembered for his convivial company, his frank and fearless expression of independent views on everything from Thai tattooing to the Melbourne Cup, from Chiang Mai prostitution to John Howard's medieval mentality. Gehan was a true sceptic, a sort of intellectual anarchist, who loved to challenge received opinion just as he relished subverting bureaucratic authority. It would be nice to think of him arguing with Saint Peter about the inequitable seating arrangements in Heaven. Our sympathies go to Margaret, his wife, and their three daughters. [Michael Young, TAPJA, 1 (2) 2000] ❖

A further obituary by Ananda Raja will appear in The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology (TAPJA), 2 (1): 2001.

predominantly household-based farming systems of an ideologically driven over-emphasis on communal arrangements. Similarly his account of the naïve brutality of the Cultural Revolution—culminating in the humiliation and death of the local Tai prince, the *chaopha*—is a potent case-study of the then Chinese state's assault on minority authority structures and value systems. "Our objective" the villagers of Lak Chang were told "was to struggle against the ideology of the bourgeoisie and all other ruling classes, and to transform education, literature and art and all other parts of the superstructure not in correspondence with the socialist economic base so as to facilitate the consolidation and development of socialism."

However, the darkest periods are now in the past and what is striking about this book is its feeling of optimism. Professor Yos proposes a sense of Tai identity that is relatively flexible, adaptive and incorporative. In the course of the study it becomes clear that the boundary between Han and Tai—while clearly demarcated—is characterised by considerable symbolic and material passage. The influence of Han culture on housebuilding, architectural symbolism, weddings, funerals, clothing and consumer spending is clearly evident. Professor Yos is fully aware of the realities of unequal power but he argues, in a crucial passage, that "[p]erhaps, the Tai Yai emulation of Han characteristics is not just distorted imitation, but has become, rather, a constitutive element in Tai Yai's lives." While acknowledging the persistent influence of primordialism in Tai studies, Professor Yos makes a strong case for a sense of ethnicity that is, to a considerable extent, a strategic refashioning of historical consciousness in response to contemporary concerns. In this fundamentally political endeavor—from which I doubt Professor Yos excludes himself—there may even be a place for dose of primordialism given that timelessness itself "may be situationally constructed."

A particular feature of the optimism of this ethnography is the relatively benign presence of the market. The level of engagement with the market of Lak Chang's villagers is little short of astounding. What appear to be enormously productive and relatively abundant agricultural lands enable Lak Chang's villagers to sell a large percentage of their agricultural production to Chinese and Tai traders, while still maintaining a secure subsistence base. There is little evidence that this substantial engagement with the market has undermined

either village solidarity or a distinctive—yet flexible—sense of local identity. Indeed there are strong indications that agricultural commercialisation, and attendant pressures on land, has strengthened villager determination to maintain local control of the all-important paddy fields, perhaps leading to a strengthening of the preference for village endogamy. Similarly, pressures on dry-season labour resources have lead to the *poi* festival becoming primarily a village undertaking rather than an opportunity for relatively well resourced households to enhance their merit and prestige. Lavish spending on wedding feasts provides new avenues for household prestige but, at the same time, certain elements of the wedding ceremony provide opportunities to make culturally distinct statements about Tai-ness.

The research for this work was supported by the Thailand Research Fund as part of the *Project on the Social and Cultural History of the Tai Peoples*. In the preface to the Thai edition Chatthip expresses the hope that this project will assist in discovering the common roots of Tai cultures and in documenting the various cultural histories of the Tai peoples. Professor Yos has made an important contribution to achieving this goal and, perhaps most importantly, persuasively demonstrates that close engagement with other cultural, political and economic systems, while sometimes extraordinarily painful, need not diminish a distinctive *and* dynamic sense of local identity.❖

PUBLICATIONS

Civility and Savagery: Social Identity in Tai States. Andrew Turton (ed). Curzon Press, Richmond, 2000. This collection of papers from the Fifth International Conference on Thai Studies provides unique insights into the position of minority groups in Tai states.❖

Dynamics of Ethnic Cultures Across National Boundaries in Southwestern China and Mainland Southeast Asia: Relations, Societies, and Languages. Hayahi Yukio and Yang Guangyuan (eds). Lanna Cultural Center, Rajabhat Institute, Chiang Mai and Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University, Kyoto. Historical and ethnographic essays on ethnic groups of the region (with Chinese language

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abstracts). The result of a workshop held at the Yunnan Institute of Nationalities, Kunming. ❖

Lak Chang a reconstruction of Tai identity in Daikong Yos Santasombat, Pandanus Books, Canberra, 2001. Soon to be released account of social and economic change in a Tai community in southwestern China. Soon available from RSPAS Publishing. Email: Ann.Andrews@anu.edu.au ❖

Phonlawat khong Chumchon nay Kaancadkaan Saphayakorn: Sathaankaan nay Pratheet Thai Anan Ganjanapan (ed). Thai Research Fund, Bangkok. Two volumes of important papers on resource management issues in Thailand. ❖

The Hmong of China : Context, Agency, and the Imaginary. Nicholas Tapp. Brill. Leiden. 2001. The book is an account of the Hmong communities of SW Sichuan, on the borders with Yunnan and Guizhou where there is a strong Hmong-speaking population. ❖

The Tai World : a Digest of articles from the Thai-Yunnan Project Newsletter (edited by Nick Tapp and Andrew Walker) includes a selection of the best articles from the old Thai-Yunnan Newsletter. AUD\$20 from RSPAS Publishing. Email: Ann.Andrews@anu.edu.au ❖

(The Thai-Yunnan Project will also be publishing the collected linguistic papers of the late Professor Gordon Downer, a specialist on the Miao-Yao, Chinese and Tai languages.) ❖

Turbulent Times and Enduring Peoples: Mountain Minorities in the South-East Asian Massif. Jean Michaud (ed.). Curzon Press, Richmond, 2000. "This book present the South-East Asian Massif highland societies in their historical context." ❖

Where China Meets Southeast Asia: Social and Cultural Change in the Border Regions. Grant Evans, Christopher Hutton and Kuah Khun Eng (eds). ISEAS, Singapore, 2000. Recent research on transnational flows in the China-Southeast Asia borderlands. ❖

Wildlife trade in Laos: the End of the Game. Hanneke Nooren and Gordon Claridge. IUCN, Amsterdam, 2001. A fascinating and detailed account of a little reported aspect of contemporary Lao trading systems. ❖

Last year the ANU Anthropology Department signed a Memorandum of Cooperation with the Anthropology Department at Yunnan University, Kunming. A Visiting Fellow from Kunming is expected in Canberra later this year, and various joint research projects are being discussed. ❖

In January Professor Naran Bilek, of the Institute for Nationality Studies, CASS, in Beijing, visited Canberra for 10 days. He gave two talks, on minority nationality policy and ethnicity in the PRC, in the Anthropology Department and at the Contemporary China Centre. ❖

Nick Tapp (ANU, Anthropology) and Gary Lee (Sydney, Ethnic Liaison Committee) have been awarded a Chiang Ching-Kuo research grant for studies of the Hmong diaspora. The project is expected to last several years and will involve initial fieldwork in Asia and Australia, followed by work in France and the US. Models of global-local interactions and returns will be constructed and new forms of communication examined. ❖

The Thai Yunnan Project is working with the Resource Management in the Asia Pacific Project (RSPAS, ANU) on developing a multi-disciplinary project on dry-season agriculture in Thailand, Laos and Vietnam.

Catriona Heath, ANU Anthropology, will be leaving for fieldwork in Thailand later this year. She is working on the role music and language play in the construction and contestation of gender among Hmong in Thailand and Australia. ❖

Suu van Nguyen, from the College of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University, is now preparing at the ANU for his fieldwork on changing patterns of land tenure and peasant perceptions in northern Vietnam, under a Ford Foundation-supported programme of exchange. ❖

Wasan Panyagaew, Lecturer at Chiang Mai University and author of *Chiwit Khang Thanon* (2000), was a Departmental Visitor in the ANU Anthropology Department, preparing for further research on culture and urban development in Northern Thailand. ❖

In February this year Andrew Walker was involved in a World Bank study of social and environmental sustainability of the mining sector in Laos. A draft report has been submitted to the Bank for comment. ❖

The Thai Yunnan Project Bulletin is produced by members of the Department of Anthropology, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, The Australian National University and edited by Nicholas Tapp and Andrew Walker. Contributions are welcome and should be submitted to the editors at typ@coombs.anu.edu.au.

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